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Santa Muerte, once practiced by a small minority of Mesoamericans, has now gain significant popularity among the dispossessed and narco-cultures of Mexican heritage. This syncretic religion that may be promoting instability and empowering Mexico's narco-cultures has many fearing for their lives. Santa Muerte has demonstrated a disregard for human rights, it threatens Mexico's national security, and it recognizes no boundaries against malevolent acts of violence. Citizens throughout Mexico, the U.S., and parts of Argentina have already witnessed the carnage left behind by the criminal minded and dispossessed who praise Santa Muerte for personal gain and protection. In the U.S., the narco-threat and its religious affiliation to Santa Muerte are real and although the problem is not nearly as severe as Mexico's current state, the crime in the U.S. seems to be rising gradually. Citizens in both the U.S. and Mexico, to include the Mexican government, agree that Santa Muerte is in and of itself a religion incompatible to good order and discipline. Its ideologies and esoteric practices in its absolute essence evidently promotes a society of lawbreakers.

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**Santa Muerte: Threatening the U.S. Homeland**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: Santa Muerte: Threatening the U.S. Homeland

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Thesis: Mexico's syncretic religion known as Santa Muerte reveals esoteric practices that promote violence among specific groups of adherents, particularly in the Latin narco-culture; it cultivates insurrection inside Mexico's borders, and it currently poses a threat to the U.S. Homeland Security.

Discussion: Santa Muerte, once practiced by a small minority of Mesoamericans, has now gained significant popularity among the dispossessed and narco-cultures of Mexico. Criminal adherents have essentially taken the religion's unorthodox practices and further distorted them to achieve instability and personal gain. Anthropologists assert that what people are witnessing is a transformation of an ancient religion branching off into a secular society of malevolent misfits while desecrating the belief system in the process. However, the violence that Santa Muerte promotes has become so rampant that it has threatened Mexico's national security, and poses a threat to the U.S. as well. The esoteric practices that these criminal adherents of Santa Muerte follow are destructive and dehumanizing. Afterward, devotees seek redemption for their acts of bloodshed by praying to Santa Muerte for exoneration. U.S. Citizens along the Mexican border are refusing to ignore the problem and are taking corrective action by thwarting any indications of criminal activity. The "death cult of the drug lords" concerns U.S. authorities at the local level; however, public officials at the state and federal levels have shown little interest in apprehending these criminal adherents.

Conclusion: In the U.S., the narco-threat and its religious affiliation to Santa Muerte are real and although the problem is not nearly as severe as Mexico's current state, the crime in the U.S. seems to be rising gradually. Many people have witnessed the violence that has taken place within their own neighborhoods, news agencies in the U.S. have broadcasted the shocking beheadings that appear to be nearing the U.S. borders, and in rare cases, Santa Muerte adherents have admitted to eyewitness accounts of human sacrifices. It is no wonder why in 2005 Mexico's Interior Ministry revoked the religious status of the Santa Muerte Church, claiming that the unorthodox pagan practices and ritual offerings were threatening the country's national security. Reactions such as these, particularly coming from individuals of similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds validate Santa Muerte of corruption and criminality. Moreover, it nullifies the belief that only people who share the same cultural background and societal stratification understand the true meaning of this religion, a concern voiced by many devotees during the study of Santa Muerte.

Evil is universal and evidently affects all people regardless of ethnicity. According to T.L. Depue, evil can be defined as "a destructive, poisonous form of spirituality with outward expression that degrade, dispirit, disintegrate, dehumanize, and destroy human beings, as well as the set of ideas, dignity, freedoms, networks, property, capital, and activities engulfing the constructive social institutions that people depend on for survival."<sup>1</sup> Santa Muerte, as practiced by the criminal adherents, undoubtedly encapsulates the aforementioned traits as defined by T. L. Depue and by bringing harm to humanity, impeding freewill, and opposing the rule of law it will continue to be a dilemma of significant concern for the U.S. and its local citizens affected by these transgressions.

Citizens in both the U.S. and Mexico, to include the Mexican government, agree that Santa Muerte is in and of itself a religion incompatible to good order and discipline. Its ideologies and esoteric practices in its absolute essence evidently promotes a society of lawbreakers.

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<sup>1</sup> Daily Mail Reporter, "Drug wars, civil unrest and now Mexico has to deal with a Holy Death Cult: High priest arrested over kidnapping and extortion," Daily Mail News, January 5, 2011, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1344235/Holy-Death-Cults-high-priest-David-Romo-arrested-Mexico-City.html> (accessed on February 7, 2011).

## Chapter One: Introduction

Mexico's syncretic religion known as Santa Muerte reveals esoteric practices that promote violence among specific groups of adherents, particularly in the Latin narcotic-culture; it cultivates insurrection inside Mexico's borders, and poses a threat to the U.S. homeland security if left unheeded.

Citizens throughout Mexico, the U.S., and parts of Argentina have already witnessed the carnage left behind by the criminal minded and dispossessed who praise Santa Muerte for personal gain and protection. This syncretic religion that promotes instability and empowering Mexico's narco-cultures has many afraid for their lives. The practice of Santa Muerte has demonstrated a disregard for human rights, it threatens Mexico's national security, and it recognizes no boundaries.

In 2005, the U.S. Army's Foreign Military Studies Office in Fort Leavenworth published an article about Santa Muerte titled, "The Death Cult of the Drug Lords." Various other institutions, such as the Strategic Studies Institute and The Routledge Group have acknowledged, in many of their research journals, the religious affiliation between the criminal minded and Santa Muerte. In fact, some scholars within the military warfighting organizations classify this potential threat as part of a new paradigm shift known as irregular warfare. Even Hollywood and foreign filmmakers have taken some of its religious tenets and incorporated them in television shows and movies such as *Dexter Season Five - First Blood*, and *Rito de La Santa Muerte*. In fact, the 2011 film, *The Green Hornet*, has helped promote Jonathan Laus and Phil Hester's comic book version of the movie; these include a new series of books involving the Green Hornet and Kato battling against the evil forces of Santa Muerte.



Trend analyses beginning from 2004 to 2011 depict a rising slope signifying the growing popularity of Santa Muerte as illustrated in Table 1, Appendix A. Exploring the data in detail reveals that Santa Muerte has been a subject of discussion in several countries, including Spain, Peru, Venezuela, and Columbia. News commentaries, within these international regions, have associated the criminal minded and dispossessed with Santa Muerte, a reality that many traditional devotees in Mexico refuse to accept. For non-adherents, particularly living near the Mexican and U.S. border, the problem is all too real. Some U.S. citizens have already equipped themselves with firearms in order to deter any physical threat that these flagrant violators may carry out, such as the narco-gangs. Local citizens and law enforcement agencies have confronted state representatives regarding the overwhelming danger that encapsulates the borderlands, but unlike Mexico's Interior of Ministry who classified Santa Muerte as a threat, the U.S. has taken no action to thwart the religious movement.

## Chapter Two: Santa Muerte

### Origin

The origin of La Santa Muerte remains uncertain. Anthropological studies indicate "certain esoteric rituals that are practiced by Santa Muerte devotees are part of a phenomenon known as Folk Catholicism, a syncretic blend of native beliefs with traditional 16<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish Roman Catholicism."<sup>1</sup> Although Santa Muerte practices include many of the Catholic religious traditions, certain rituals within Santa Muerte pre-date the Spanish conquest, such as conducting blood libations to venerate religious deities. Historical documents and ethnographic research also show that the elements of the pre-colonial Aztec and Catholic religion exhibit parallels between the two belief systems, hence one reason many believe Catholicism endured for so long among the Aztec culture. For instance, one finding reveals that the veneration of

multiple Aztec gods, such as Huehuateotl, (old god), Itzpapalotl (goddess of agriculture), Mictlantecuhltle (god of the dead), and Mictlantecihuatl (goddess of the underworld), mirror the practices of the Roman polytheistic worship of deities which began as early as 312 AD.<sup>2</sup>

Where the Catholic and indigenous religion differ mostly are in written laws. According to scholars, the fundamental moral laws of Catholicism existed long before the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D; however, the Church began codifying what would eventually become the canon laws around 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD.<sup>3</sup> The Aztec religion on the other hand, had no written doctrine, but rather traditions passed on through word of mouth and ritualistic practices making the belief system susceptible to the damaging effects of individual interpretation.

The fundamental principals of the polytheistic Aztec traditions changed further as Aztec tribes conquered other empires and adopted their respective gods and religious practices. These practices included burning of incense and human flesh, sprinkling with human blood, self-mutilation, human sacrifice, and ritual cannibalism.<sup>4</sup> Spanish priests were appalled at these actions, and coerced the Aztec people to assimilate into another religious belief system known as Spanish Catholicism. In time, that also evolved into various syncretic practices among the Mexican people, but the one sentiment that remained deeply embedded within the principles of their belief was the obsession with death and mysticism.

Many are convinced that Mexico's Santa Muerte is inspired from Días de Los Muertos, an observance that has also existed since the pre-Hispanic Aztec period. Otherwise known as Day of the Dead, this ancient tradition of commemorating the deceased is honored on November 2<sup>nd</sup> of every year, bringing families together at cemeteries or at home around elaborate alters to pay tribute to love ones who have passed away, as well as reuniting with living family members. Participants traditionally gather in precession to decorate the graves of the departed with food

offerings, flowers, candles, cigarettes, and alcohol, similar to the offerings and altar dressings associated with Santa Muerte.

The fundamental belief in the two customs demonstrates the passion of Mesoamericans embracing death as a part of everyday life, often personifying icons as mediators between the departed and the living. Even though Santa Muerte and Días de Los Muertos are mutually exclusive in terms of ritual veneration and religious ideologies, multiple commonalities between the two appear complimentary.

Further research has also revealed that the religious practices of Santa Muerte exhibit many of the Afro-Caribbean religious traditions. Scholars have asserted that Santa Muerte combines Afro-Caribbean Santería, Haitian Voodoo, and Brazilian Palo Mayombe with modern day Catholic practices.<sup>5</sup> As West-African slaves migrated northward during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, they brought with them Yoruba traditions from the Lucumi religion. The name “Santería” derives from the correlation between the Yoruba deities called Orishas and the Roman Catholic saints. The exact origin of the Voodoo is also unknown, but like Santería, it is a coalescence of West-African paganism and Catholic worship of saints. Brazilian Palo Mayombe is another syncretic Afro-Caribbean belief system originating from Central-Africa that combines the belief of the ancient African Congo tribes with the religious practices of Yoruba slaves and Catholicism.

All four of these religions bear similar resemblance, whether through divination, sacrifice, or mediumship; practitioners believe their deities and spirits provide them with guidance, wisdom, success, and protection.<sup>6</sup> What makes them threatening to society however, are the fundamental practices that tend to appose ethical and moral tenets, which may lead to lawlessness acts. Even worse, are practitioners who resort to “exploratory excursions” and turn

them into unorthodox practices for power, money, and personal gain much like what may be transpiring within the criminal realm of Santa Muerte.

### Symbology

The study of Santa Muerte reveals coded messages hidden within the vast array of symbols. Shrouded in a variety of colors and small trinkets, the skeletal figure traditionally holds a scythe in one hand and a globe in the other, symbolizing hope, prosperity, and dominion over the world as seen in Figure 1, Appendix B. Adherents have personified Santa Muerte for centuries; the icon is perceived as a saint with supernatural qualities and the gate into the spiritual realm. According to devotees, the unsanctioned saint does not discriminate among its followers regardless of age, sex, or immoral disposition. It grants prayer requests to everyone even if they are sinister. Santa Muerte carries or wears a variety of colorful objects denoting different meanings that only adherents truly understand. For example, the scythe that the macabre figure holds in one hand represents the power over good and evil energy, as well as the ability to influence hope and prosperity, among other things. The length of the scythe symbolizes the ability to reach far places. Some devotees use the scythe to bring death upon their enemies by the cutting of a string across the blade of the scythe, but rarely do traditional adherents practice this since it would demand a significant or equivalent offering to Santa Muerte in return. The globe represents the power and dominion of death over the world and combining them both achieves greater affects. The symbol of the scale represents equity, justice, and impartiality, all attributes that devotees believe Santa Muerte possesses and instills upon its people. Apart from the iconic figure, an hourglass commonly placed adjacent to her, indicates several meanings, such as the time a person has on earth or that death has no end or the continuation of life in the afterworld. The lamp represents intelligence and guidance through all

facets of darkness, albeit ignorance or dark energy, such as Santería. The owl symbolizes wisdom and the bearer of message with an ability to navigate through darkness. All these symbols as seen in Figure 2, Appendix B, in conjunction with novenas, which is a devotion consisting of different prayers repeated over a period of days, supposedly strengthens the effect of the prayer.

Many of these symbols associated with Santa Muerte are surfacing in the U.S. and at an alarming rate, particularly among the Latin American cultures. Transnational narco-gangs, such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), 18<sup>th</sup> Street, Barrio Azteca, and the Mexican Mafia (a.k.a, La Eme) are showing even greater interest in the worship of Santa Muerte. Talismans, amulets, stickers, colored rosaries, scapulars, and other trinkets have gained significant popularity among these iconic worshippers who place their trust in them for guidance and protection. These items and other paraphernalia are typically found at local religious supply stores called, 'botanicas', and in places such as Laredo, Texas, they are selling at a high rate<sup>7</sup> U.S. law enforcement agencies are concerned that the demand of these items directly reflects the violence and the growing trend of adherents, particularly within the narco gang communities. Those that dislike carrying objects often resort to tattoos symbolizing their deeper devotion towards the death saint as seen in Figure 3, Appendix B.

### *Santa Muerte Aliases*

Adherents who entrust their lives to Santa Muerte often establish a tight bond with the icon and personify her with affectionate names, such as La Santísima (The Saint), La Flaquita (The Skinny Girl), Niña Blanca (The White Girl), and Hermana de Luz (Sister of Light). (See Table 2, Appendix A for additional names.) Older adults have often referred to the figure as 'mother'. They adorn the skulled head with a tiara full of faux jewels and cover the existing

cadaver with colored beads, photos, flowers, money, and ornate garments, symbolizing either adoration or an act of atonement.

### *Colors Suggest Meanings*

Like the globe and scythe, the colors also suggest various meanings and they typically relate to the type of traditional offering. For instance, red symbolizes love and passion, a color regularly used by devotees who are searching for companionship or wanting to strengthen a relationship, so they present Santa Muerte with a red rose. Gold signifies the desire for money, economic power, and success, a choice often desired by business owners and narco-traffickers alike. Those looking for keenness, mental health, or concentration provide offerings colored in blue. Natural bone color has several meanings, but the most common translates to peace and harmony. Drug addicts, alcoholics, and those with diseases, traditionally present offerings in yellow for medical support and rapid healing. For good luck, they use the color silver. White represents purification and defense against evil. Purple brings good health. Those encountering trouble with the law, or who are seeking legal help, use the color green. The color black, a symbol of protection against black magic, and evil spirits were brought about by other occults, such as Santería, Palo Mayombe or Voodoo.<sup>8</sup>

## Chapter Three: Violence in Mexico

### *Sanctuaries*

As the religion begins to undergo a change in the types of devotees, so too, are the traditional meanings and practices becoming more malefic, thus causing concern even among the traditional adherents of Santa Muerte. In fact, the Government of Mexico has noted that what was once a transparent religion has now become a threat to its national security.<sup>9</sup> The urban narco gangs that are beginning to make up the majority of the followers are promoting the

religion, just as they would their gangs, erecting shrines throughout Mexico. Like their taggings on the wall, members of the religion have even erected extravagant Santa Muerte shrines to signify pride or convey hidden messages.

Along the Mexican border, specifically around the indigent neighborhoods of Nuevo Laredo, shrines of Santa Muerte overlook the highways and local market places.<sup>10</sup> These shrines range from simple pocket size emulates to extravagant 75-foot statues of the icon deity, such as the one erected in Santa Maria Cuauhtepic, Mexico. One local in Tepito, Mexico spent over \$2,000 U.S. dollars on a shrine containing lavish detailed fabrics and costly items. However, to Mexican federal authorities, these are all symbols associated with criminal activity that inspire death and ongoing violence. Civilian or military working parties, consisting of 3-5 man crews have destroyed these iconic temples using a combination of bulldozers and sledgehammers in order to thwart the religious propaganda. But the efforts are futile, as Santa Muerte has already consumed all of Mexico and is now gradually spreading throughout the U.S. as depicted in Figure 6, Appendix B. So far, the Mexican government has demolished over 70 shrines throughout all of Coahuila, Mexico and the surrounding areas, but attacking the unsanctioned saint only seems to encourage hostility among the local populace.

David Romo Guillén a self-appointed archbishop and high priest of this syncretic religion considers the destruction of the Santa Muerte shrines unacceptable and in the past has encouraged his parishioners to demand that the Mexican government cease the destruction of the shrines; otherwise, they are threatening to carry out a "Holy War".<sup>11</sup>

Romo, declaring August 15<sup>th</sup> as the patron saint festival, holds monthly worship along the Calle Alfarería, Barrio de Tepito, México D.F, attracting over 1,500 adherents from various parts of town mainly comprising of young to middle aged citizens. In 2000, Romo deliberately

established his own church, La Iglesia Catolica Tradicional Mex-USA, to honor the unsanctioned saint and oppose the Roman Catholic Church for not supporting the belief of Santa Muerte. He believes that the Santa Muerte religion encourages hope among the dispossessed and benefits those who live a life of crime, unlike the Catholic Church who condemns any acts of violence.

### Religious Transmutation

Similarly, a small number of anthropologists do not support the notorious claims about Santa Muerte. They believe that the religion is harmless, and find little reason to refuse sanctifying this syncretic belief system despite the proverbial ceremonial beheadings associated with the icon worship. They assert that the religion is an extension of Catholicism and that violence plays no part in the practice. They believe that what people are witnessing is a transformation of the religion branching off into a secular society of malevolent misfits while desecrating the belief system in the process. Moreover, the lack of doctrine is generating various interpretations, thereby aggravating the metamorphic state presently occurring. In other words, due to the lack of doctrine, the narco-cultures have developed their own innovative ways of revering Santa Muerte.

Adherents have never codified the syncretic religion in order to standardize its ritual practices. According to Tony Kail, crime specialist, founder and director of World View Intelligence, "it is apparent that there are differences in how she is worshipped in the U.S."<sup>12</sup> Consequently, this has created significant problems for Santa Muerte and for many of its devout practitioners who are convinced that the religion is upright and considerate of others. Contrary to this belief, many assert that the Mexican adherents of Santa Muerte are gradually reverting to



their ancient polytheistic practices and Aztec traditions, essentially rituals that involve various forms of human sacrifices.

### Traditional and Unorthodox Offerings

Prior to 1980, linking Santa Muerte with any form of blood sacrifice was unheard of. Within a period of 30 years, the ritual offerings went from a traditional gift of candy and cigarettes to the complex oblations of beheadings and mutilations. (See Table 3, Appendix A for traditional offerings.) This is because the manner in which the offerings are given and the gifts themselves normally require an obligation equal to the rewards received by Santa Muerte, and those wishing for personal gains, such as money, power, and protection are desiring to take it to a whole nother level of sheer greed. The larger and more complex the demand, the greater the offering must be, so adherents resort to the ultimate gift, human sacrifices.

The following passage describes a Santa Muerte devotee, who equates his gift offerings based on the favor that the macabre deity presented to him while in prison.

*Ramón, an active member of an infamous Latin drug gang, responds apathetically after just receiving a maximum jail sentence of 25-years for the murder of another rival gang member. He appears confident that Santa Muerte, a macabre saint that he has grown to love and trust throughout the past nine years, will not let him down during these trying moments. Later, while in prison, he prays earnestly to this colorfully shrouded skeletal icon that closely resembles Mexico's cultural catholic image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. His ritualistic offerings to Santa Muerte include candy and other small trinkets that he has gathered in exchange for his freedom and the protection from other inmates. He knows that when Santa Muerte fulfills his request he must return the favor by offering the unsanctioned saint a far greater gift than just a pittance of candy and trinkets, otherwise she will seek revenge for failing to meet her expectations. Within five years after his initial sentence, the state approves Ramón's early release package. He is back out on the street only to return to a life of crime, except now, he is deeply rooted in the iconic worship. In keeping with his pact to Santa Muerte, Ramón finally finds the ultimate ritual offering, the human head of a rival gang member.*

Today, blood libations are occurring daily, in fact, they are reaching record numbers. Hundreds perhaps thousands of lives throughout Mexico's indigent neighborhoods have been

used as offering to Santa Muerte. On the surface, it appears like another one of Mexico's drug related incidents, but underneath all the bloodshed lays religious connotations, and unless some form of Santa Muerte paraphernalia remains at the scene, officials are unable to tie the two together. There are however, subtle trends and identifying patterns that have appeared in various mass mutilations, such as the stacking of bodies, or beheadings, both of which have also appeared in ritual offerings to Santa Muerte.

Adherents, specifically the narco-gangs, prostitutes, and the dispossessed are venturing within this complex and forbidding realm of blood sacrifices to seek greater rewards and spiritual fulfillment. Gulf coast trafficking groups like the Zetas for example, have resorted to ritual human sacrifices and beheadings in honor of Santa Muerte.<sup>13</sup> At the trial of Gabriel Cardona Ramirez, a member of a 3-person sleeper hit man for the Gulf cartel, "investigators alleged that he collected his victims' blood in a glass and drank a toast to Santa Muerte at the home of the alleged killers."<sup>14</sup> Other ritual beheading with connections to Santa Muerte occurred on August 24, 2008, after Mexican investigators discovered 11 bodies with signs of torture in Merida, Mexico. Officials apprehended three suspects in connection with the mass beheadings, indicating that they found bloody hatchets and an altar to Santa Muerte."<sup>15</sup> In Juarez, Mexico, a female between the age of 25 and 30 laid decapitated in a pool of blood, displaying tattoos of Santa Muerte on her lower back.<sup>16</sup> On January 8, 2011, law enforcement agencies discovered 15 headless bodies near a shopping center in Acapulco, Mexico, sending a gruesome message to anyone interfering with the narco-gangs.<sup>17</sup> Although no links to Santa Muerte were mentioned, thousands of devotees attended the Santa Muerte services in memory of the victims. In the Northern State of Sinaloa, a report of a mass murder revealed the bodies of 50 victims with tattoos and jewelry depicting Santa Muerte.<sup>18</sup> In other cases, rituals involved the use of young

uninitiated genders, such as the incident in 2000, where a local Tepitoan sacrificed small virgin girls for remittance and protection from Santa Muerte. Locals claimed that the offerings given by this criminal adherent resulted in the reward of new cars, women, houses, and drugs.<sup>19</sup> Even in South America, a case involving Santa Muerte has surfaced. On August 28, 2010, a 22-year-old male, from Buenos Aires Argentina, killed six people within a span of four months as an offering to Santa Muerte, evidently showing gratitude to the icon for granting the assassin his wish.<sup>20</sup>

There are over 180 Santa Muerte cases from 2006 to 2010, involving beheadings and violent ritual offerings within Mexico's indigent neighborhoods and affluent towns; conceivably the numbers would double if taking into account the ritual beheadings that have gone unreported. As the figures continue to grow, so does the popularity of Santa Muerte. Within the last two years killings have increased inside Mexico's drug infested towns, accounting for 186 reported beheadings out of an estimated 30,000 deaths.<sup>21</sup> The people of Mexico have acknowledged that several victims, in some form or another, were associated with the cult of Santa Muerte.<sup>22</sup> However, no one can truly ascertain the exact numbers since most of the cases remain unsolved; nevertheless, open sources indicate that some of these deaths were religiously driven. As of 2010, the total estimated deaths in Mexico since 2006 have exceeded 30,000, as result of the ongoing violence in Mexico. Of the total deaths, 12,456 occurred from January to November 2010.<sup>23</sup> That is a 29.5% increase compared to 2009 with 9,600 deaths.

### *Narco-terrorism, Groups*

The ongoing violence in Mexico has undermined the legitimacy of the government. Many of the poor and dispossessed who look up to Santa Muerte for repentance are constantly contributing to these narco-terrorist groups in order to collect their rewards. The killings that

transpire daily no longer warrant the need for police officers, since those who are enforcing the law protect those who are committing the crimes. Many Mexican citizens have lost trust in their government, subsequently undermining everything associated with the rule of law. Crime is at an all time high, particularly in places like Tepito, Mexico and as the problem progresses, so does the need to ask Santa Muerte for protection.

### Corruption

The 2010 Corruption Perception Index ranks Mexico as 91 out of 178 nations for perception of corruption in the public sector.<sup>24</sup> “Corruption represents not a failure of a law... but a lack of political will to hold accountable those individuals who would seek personal gain through illegal means.”<sup>25</sup> However, by enforcing political will, many politicians, police officials, and other federal employees, place themselves and their families in danger by those who truly control the government, the narco-culture. Eighty percent of Mexico’s population does not believe in their own judicial system.<sup>26</sup> The people have claimed that the majority of the kidnappings, beheadings, drug trafficking, and extortion are being committed by the same individuals that are hired to protect their cities. In 2009, Mexico’s special crime units arrested 93 Mexican police in the city of Hidalgo on corruption charges. Officials claim that some of the police were receiving over \$225,000 a month for keeping the drug cartel informed of internal operations.<sup>27</sup> Some of these police officers were adherents of Santa Muerte, operating freely and using the drug profits as bargaining tools against key political figures to obtain greater gain. However, when their transactions or major drug operations were unsuccessful, adherents did not see it as a failure by Santa Muerte, but as a necessity to provide the icon with greater offerings. The psychological empowerment that the icon infused on the worshiper reinforced “social fissures that eventually contributed to the erosion of the state authority”.<sup>28</sup>

### Cell Networks

A large number of Santa Muerte adherents involved in clandestine networks are deeply engaged in the global trade of illicit drug use, slave holding, kidnapping, exploitation in prostitution, and arms trafficking. The Zetas for example, who rely on Santa Muerte for religious enlightenment, are an elite group of former Mexican Army Special Forces that have developed underground networks primarily to enforce the rules on behalf of the Gulf Cartels. They are kinetic and decisive in their tactics, frequently resisting the onslaught of Mexico's military soldiers. Their capabilities are highly sophisticated, ranging from intelligence and counterintelligence gathering, to aerial assaults, and although Santa Muerte may not overtly emerge during their executions, they strongly depend on her for protection and vindication.<sup>29</sup>

Recent adversarial conflicts between drug cartels and the Mexican Army resulted in the loss of many of their experienced fighters, thus tapping into their urban narco-gang reserves for reinforcement. New recruits receive special training and are equipped with sophisticated weapon systems that frequently outmatch many of their adversarial counterparts. With revenues exceeding 30 billion dollars a year from drug transactions, it is no wonder that they are able to finance their illegal operations and supply their groups with sophisticated equipment. Moreover, their revenues are helping to facilitate networks beyond the borders of Mexico and into places, such as Canada, South America, the Caribbean, Europe, Africa, and Asia.<sup>30</sup> With many of them harnessing the tenets of Santa Muerte, it is no wonder that the religion is spreading globally.

### Random Terror

Slave holding, sexual activity with minors, kidnapping, and beheadings are all various forms of random terror that foster insecurity among the Mexican citizens. Novenas to La Santa Muerte are at times, preceded by ruthless killings, often empowering criminals to commit even

larger crimes. Beheadings are the most common of these ritualistic practices as aforementioned. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24, which describes counterinsurgency, identifies intimidation schemes of random terror, such as the ones used by the narco-gangs, as an early stage of insurgency. Criminals “may be tempted to go to almost any extreme to attract followers”, using a combination of propaganda and intimidation to succeed.<sup>31</sup>

For instance, a newspaper agency in Mexico known as El Mañana refused to release an article involving the death of a local narco-gang member for fear of retribution by members of Los Zetas, the organization notoriously known for their merciless killings and religious affiliation to Santa Muerte. Just days prior to releasing the story, an unknown suspect lobbed an exploding grenade inside the building only to serve as a reminder to staff members not to disclose any more facts about the Zeta movement.<sup>32</sup> Since 2000, these narco-gangs murdered over 55 Mexican reporters for neglecting to take heed of their warnings.

### *Cultivating Local Support*

While some Zetas are enforcing societal insecurity through malefic means to control the populace, Zeta members in Nuevo Laredo, are resorting to more civilized tactics, such as promising work with medical benefits for individuals willing to join their organization.<sup>33</sup> Many of the marginalized and dispossessed locals consider these employment offers very attractive, despite the Zeta’s notorious reputation and religious affiliation with Santa Muerte. Some residents recognize that their previous encounters with the law prevent them from attaining credible jobs, so they take advantage of these employment opportunities in order to feed their families. Some Santa Muerte supporters consider these resources as opportunities presented by the icon herself.

Like many of the terrorist groups abroad, narco-gangs use humanitarian assistance schemes to cultivate support. A number of them are buying their way into communities by contributing significant sums of money to local hospitals, schools, banks, churches, and other public organizations. As adherents of Santa Muerte, they use these types of humanitarian efforts as part of their recruiting schemes. Strategies such as these, aim to win the hearts and minds of the surrounding populace and local government officials. In fact, according to Mexican Treasury Secretary Ernesto Cordero, over 10 billion U.S. dollars circulating through Mexico's banks are linked to the narco-culture.<sup>34</sup> However, money is not the only lure used to entice the locals in supporting these organizations. Santa Muerte, likewise, appears to be having a positive impression, not only among the indigent Mexican population, but among the U.S populace as well.

## Chapter Four: Inside the U.S.

### *Popular U.S. Support*

While some of Mexico's citizens consider Santa Muerte as a dangerous occult, businesses in the U.S. are sponsoring events that promote Santa Muerte. On September 10, 2010, the Sacred Machine Museum hosted the "Santa Muerte Music & Arts Festival" in Tucson, Arizona with the support of "Providence Service Corporation, Wells Fargo Bank, Jim Click Automotive, KXCI Radio, Zocalo Magazine and Bourn Partners".<sup>35</sup> An estimated ten-thousand people attended the celebration, all taking part in the festivities. Songs included drug ballads from music genres, such as Narcocorridos, popularly known for their rhythmic based satires that expose the truth about infamous drug lords. Consequently, these band members, especially lead singers, live their life in fear, constantly looking over their shoulder for hit men seeking retaliation for their intrusive lyrics. For this reason, they too turn to the icon saint for protection.

Some music artists have even included the image of Santa Muerte on their albums, as seen in Figure 4, Appendix B, symbolizing their devotion for the icon.

Although entertaining for many Americans living in Arizona, some locals south of the border may consider the entire movement as demonic, particularly the locals living in anguish over the loss of their loved ones who were victims of Santa Muerte. They have no inclination of pursuing this esoteric practice, despite the growing U.S. popularity. They have become a social alienation among the adherents who proudly praise and adorn the macabre icon and refuse any promising opportunity that Santa Muerte may present despite their indigent living conditions. Those who have witnessed first hand the instability that Santa Muerte creates understand that harnessing her energy is not worth the pain and suffering she eventually bestows.

### *Developing an Insurgency*

U.S. Border agencies and local police officers can relate with many of the Mexican locals living near the borders, as they too have witnessed the devastation caused by the criminal minded and dispossessed. Some speculate that the growing trend of lawlessness and violent ritual acts associated with Santa Muerte, may be directly contributing to the start of insurgency in the U.S. According to various counter-insurgency publications, undermining the rule of law, fostering insecurity, and cultivating support encompasses the manifestation of an insurgency.<sup>36</sup> The U.S. has already received Santa Muerte with open arms as aforementioned, and narco-gangs emigrating from Mexico are known to foster insecurity among the Latino youth who refuse to join their organization. The desire for money and popularity is never ending and with the help of Santa Muerte, their spiritual fervor for power grows indefinitely, thus, contributing to eventual insurrection as these nefarious adherents continue to evolve. Criminals live by these religious



tenets to exonerate themselves for their unlawful actions, but by doing so heinous acts of violence endure.

Dr. Robert J. Bunker, the author of several exceptional counter-insurgency and counter-drug related articles including, "Torture, beheadings, and narcocultos," has stated that, "insurgency has at its basis a spiritual, if not religious, component that threatens the underlying foundations of our modern value system."<sup>37</sup> The fundamental aspects of Santa Muerte are befitting of this statement, as evident of its tenets, which have already generated insurrection throughout all of Mexico and are now potentially becoming a matter of contention in certain parts of the United States. If the problem persists, anticipate that local law officials in certain parts of the states may encounter crimes mirroring that of their neighboring country Mexico. These crimes blatantly violate human rights, and undermine the rule of law often occurring within the public schools and local communities.

### Undermining the Law

Harris County Precinct 3, Constable Deputy Daniel Lopez, a certified gang specialist who has studied the esoteric practices of Santa Muerte, has first hand knowledge of the dangers that lurk underneath the surface of this religion. He is concerned that it will undermine the rule of law, particularly within the Latin communities and has stated in an interview with Houston news correspondents that "not only do those who practice in the religion deal in narcotics, but are also known to delve into human sacrifice".<sup>38</sup> The new U.S. Marshal for the Western District of Texas, Robert Almonte, also claims that Santa Muerte has and continues to "play an important role in justifying and magnifying violence related to drug trafficking."<sup>39</sup> Tony Kail, crime specialist and author of *Santa Muerte: Mexico's Mysterious Saint of Death*, addresses the

correlation between the notorious narco-culture and Santa Muerte and concludes that violence and disorder are permeating throughout the Midwestern U.S., as a result.<sup>40</sup>

### *Creating Insecurity*

Not only do the narco-gangs who are involved with Santa Muerte undermine the rule of law, but they also use various forms of terror to foster insecurity among some of the U.S. Hispanic population. These bands of hard-nosed criminal adherents are intimidating U.S. police officials, high-ranking politicians, and women and children. In fact, 14-year-old Edgar Jimenez, a native of San Diego, California, took part in a number of beheadings on behalf of Los Zetas, but not by choice. He indicated to police officials that, "he had been threatened with death if he did not take part in the killings."<sup>41</sup> Many innocent patrons accept "bribes, to preserve their own skins, readily compromising their values to join what will become a growing criminal insurgency" backed by religious fusion.<sup>42</sup>

### *U.S. Gangs*

American youths are becoming victims of this "criminal insurgent radicalization". Cartels are hiring young kids from poor Latin neighborhoods as hit men to enforce their rules and conduct assassinations. Their recruiting efforts aim to exploit indigent societies, using large sums of cash to entice new recruits to join their organizations and commit savage crimes. In time, these inductees become deeply involved in Santa Muerte, not only relying on her for complete protection, but asking her for pardon as well. Unfortunately, the immersion of violence and corruption translates to death for many of the poor who refuse to live a life of crime. "*Plata O Plomo?*" This is a term which means, "to take our silver or we will fill you with our lead", is a threat commonly used by narco-gangs to coerce individuals into subverting for the sake of money.

However, coercing has been unnecessary for the narco-gangs since most of the new recruits are former convicts in desperate need of a job. Santa Muerte adherents like Roberto Murillo, from Capitola, California recruit young Latin gang members to sell methamphetamines for profit.<sup>43</sup> These new recruits often receive thousands of dollars as earnings for completing multiple sales transactions. Larger organizations, such as the drug cartels obtained their recruiting quotas much the same way. However, once they obtain enough recruits, they transport them to Mexico to be housed and trained to become hit men or cocaine traffickers instead, introducing them to state of the art weapon systems and military tactics. Soon after, the recruits branch out to various locations throughout Latin and South America, while the rest return to the U.S. in order to form into narco-gangs so that they can perform unscrupulous acts of violence on behalf of the cartel. Many of them are loyal devotees to Santa Muerte, always seeking to find protection from their adversaries prior to their lethal hits. These networks come together using military like tactics to accomplish many of their missions.

These gangs typically resemble the organizational structure of a small military unit. They consist of squad elements further divided into several fire teams, deliberately set up in this manner to facilitate efficient operations. Leaders employ distributed operations (DO) as a method for command and control, usually delivering a single block of instructions to their subordinates and allowing them to follow through without further guidance. Higher echelon commonly provides very little information about the overall objective, so that members do not compromise the mission should their capture ensue. These methods not only reveal the tactical experience within the organization, but they demonstrate the danger posed to local law enforcement agencies who are attempting to thwart their criminal motives.

### Narco-terrorism

Although many of the social characteristics of the narco-gangs appear similar to their native street gang counterparts, specialized training, money, and religious fusion sets them apart from the rest. They have developed into a highly complex organization of assassins using advanced tactics combined with the art of integrated fires. Their weapons systems include, but are not limited to MP-5's, AR-15's, P90 submachine guns, grenade launchers, helicopters, high performance power boats, improvised explosive devices, and 50-caliber machine guns.<sup>44</sup> Santa Muerte who overlooks the inequities of those who behave maliciously, faithfully fortifies their religious convictions as they prepare to wreak havoc among their adversaries.

U.S. border patrols are not usually prepared to challenge these narco-terrorist groups because of their array of effective firepower and radicalized views. Law enforcement agencies feel that they are not receiving adequate support from the federal government to counter the fight against the ongoing violence. Citizens living near the borders are frustrated with the U.S. federal government for not intervening. In Phoenix, special agents are unable to impede the drug distribution networks and control the amount of kidnappings that have been ongoing, thus making Arizona the second largest kidnapping state.<sup>45</sup> Since 98% of Mexico's crimes go unsolved, some of these narco-terrorists kidnap their victims and take them across the border to torture them, behead them, or sacrifice them, later to return to the states for another kidnapping. The likelihood of using the bodies as a sacrificial offering to Santa Muerte is probable and to discount it would only perpetuate further practices.

U.S. law enforcement agencies have voiced their concerns up the chain regarding these narco-terrorist groups, but U.S. officials at higher headquarters have failed to recognize the concern. Some Federal agents have stated, "Getting bureaucrats to understand the growing

danger is difficult when most lawmakers won't even acknowledge many of the problems already happening along the U.S. border.”<sup>46</sup> In 2006, Sheriff Arvin West with the Hudspeth County Sheriffs Department witnessed the Mexican Army aiding the narco-terrorist groups by helping them smuggle humans and contraband across the Rio Grande. Sheriff West immediately reported the activity to his higher headquarters, but they appeared to disregard the matter. Days after the incident, Sheriff West delivered a videotape to congressman Reyes (D-El Paso) showing actual footage of the Mexican Army aiding the narco-terrorists once again, but Congressmen Reyes downgraded the issue by telling Sheriff West that he was “lying or mistaken” about the events.<sup>47</sup>

### *Violence in the U.S.*

People can expect that the “interpenetration and interdependence” between the U.S. and Mexico will create scatter on both sides of the border, consequently, exposing many U.S. Citizens to the dangerous threat elicited by the ongoing violence against the narco-cultures.<sup>48</sup> Some analysts claim that the results of the counter-narcotic operations are approaching the pinnacle of ultimate chaos, a necessary phase before returning Mexico to a state of stability.

For many Mexican citizens the turbulence caused by the ongoing violence and corruption, combined with Mexico’s negative economy has forced thousands to abandon their jobs, homes, and friends in order to migrate north of the border in search of safety and a better life. Likewise, narco-gangs are not far behind them, except they travel north to expand their lines of drug operations for greater profit as well as to avoid their adversarial threats.

Most Americans living along the border are aware of the threat that these narco-gangs impose on their victims, including their pagonistic rituals that many hope never to encounter. Local U.S. law enforcement agencies have witnessed firsthand, the effect that these criminal

devotees have on their targets. Sheriff West from the Hudspeth County Sheriff Department is extremely worried about the violent rituals and beheadings that have occurred within the immediate area and has authorized residents to "arm" themselves as a means of self-preservation. "You farmers, I'm telling you right now, arm yourselves," he stated. "As they say the old story is, it's better to be tried by 12 than carried by six. Damn it, I don't want to see six people carrying you."<sup>49</sup>

Anti-drug units have encountered Santa Muerte paraphernalia during many of their missions. During a drug bust in South Dallas, law enforcement agencies discovered small plastic toy soldiers immersed in flames as part of a Santa Muerte ritual to commit harm to those intervening in the drug trade.<sup>50</sup> In Southampton and Westhampton, New York, law enforcement officials there refer to these encounters as 'anti police shrines'.<sup>51</sup> In Laredo, Texas, the Webb County Sheriffs Department discovered a bowl of blood sprinkled with herbs and roots during one of their routine drug raids.<sup>52</sup> Agents of the Tennessee drug task force discovered several Santa Muerte shrines during a drug bust. After questioning the suspect about the meaning of the Santa Muerte shrine, the suspect concluded his statement with the term "mother".<sup>53</sup> In 1989, a case surfaced involving 21 year-old American, Mark Kilroy, who while on a spring break in Matamoros, was brutally tortured and used as part of a ritual sacrifice to Santa Muerte. Another case involved the immolation of a rival gang member, in which two individuals incinerated their victim and mixed his ashes with cocaine as a ritual offering to Santa Muerte. They believed that by smoking the two in conjunction with prayer, it allowed them to retain the victim's spirit for protection from future threats.<sup>54</sup>

## Chapter Five: Counter-indications – support in the U.S. and Mexico

### *Threat Analysis for the U.S. Specifically at the Border*

The trend of Santa Muerte is growing exponentially. Mexican Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTO) have gone beyond the northern borders and are operating deep within some of the regions of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force districts.<sup>55</sup> According to the 2010 National Drug Threat Assessment report, DTO's pose the greatest threat to the United State's security particularly around the U.S./Mexican borders. They are establishing strong relationships with Latin Street gangs in the U.S. in order to "facilitate the expansion of their midlevel and retail drug distribution operations into more rural and suburban areas."<sup>56</sup> This dilemma brings with it the same terrorism that is currently present in Mexico, to include the religious affiliation of Santa Muerte. There are an estimated 2.5 million Santa Muerte devotees throughout Mexico, many of which are now operating in the U.S. These Latin gangs, who have now exceeded 900,000 members throughout 2,500 U.S. cities, are likely to join the communal of Santa Muerte worshippers, if they have not done so already.<sup>57</sup> Statistically speaking, this number exceeds the entire population of Fort Worth, Texas, according to the 2010 U.S. census report. This problem may be too large for any single law enforcement agency to handle, particularly at the local level.

### *Security Counter Measures*

There is no question that Santa Muerte has significantly affected Mexico's social structure. The criminal and religious predispositions of the narco-terrorist have threatened Mexico's national security to the degree of weakening their internal police forces. Some claim that the anti-drug campaign between the U.S. and Mexico, also known as the Merida Initiative, has had little effect on Mexico's fight against the narco-cultures, and others speculate that

Mexico's severe internal corruption has adversely affected the implementation of the initiative. "As long as exclusion, isolation, and political despair characterize life for the marginalized in Mexico, we can expect that the cult of Santa Muerte will prosper" and continue to cultivate insurrection.<sup>58</sup>

According to the U.S. Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, the 400 million dollar Merida Initiative has been apparently paving the way to reducing the threat against the narco-cultures. Although some U.S. citizens disagree with this notion, the U.S. government asserts that careful consideration must be given to the nature of the operations because of the strategic and political implications that may arise should the U.S. openly intervene. Organizations, such as the Strategic Studies Institute, wholeheartedly agree with this approach. They have stated that the U.S. should "forcefully exert its influence, but primarily through private diplomacy rather than public demonstration."<sup>59</sup> Despite the security package signed into law on June 30, 2008 between the U.S. and Mexico, essentially delineating "the cooperation against the common threat of organized crime based on the premise of shared responsibility and strategic partnership,"<sup>60</sup> Mexico continues to claim that there are no U.S. boots on the ground.

Many citizens who are demanding for a more aggressive and decisive undertaking by the U.S. Government, claim that diplomacy has had little effect on thwarting the criminal movement, that heretofore, the employment of previous counter measures appears ineffective, as evidence of prior Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) sting operations. A year after the DEA executed Operation Xcellerator against the Sinaloa drug cartel, one of the leading admirers of Santa Muerte, political officials concluded that the results were negligible despite the capture of over 761 suspects, and 23 tons of various narcotics worth over \$61 million U.S. dollars. Seeing as



how their enterprise consists of thousands of members and their revenues reaching well into the billions, it is no wonder that many Santa Muerte adherents are eager to fill the gap caused by the capture of their cohorts. As long as there is a high demand for drugs in the U.S., corruption, crime, and cult-like zealotry will continue to plague Mexico and eventually the U.S. if they fail to acknowledge the problem.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

In the U.S., the narco-threat and its religious affiliation to Santa Muerte are real and although the problem is not nearly as severe as Mexico's current state, the crime seems to be rising gradually. Many people have witnessed the violence that has taken place within their own neighborhoods, news agencies in the U.S. have broadcasted the shocking beheadings that appear to be nearing the U.S. borders, and in rare cases, Santa Muerte adherents have admitted to eyewitness accounts of human sacrifices. It is no wonder why in 2005 Mexico's Interior of Ministry revoked the religious status of the Santa Muerte Church, claiming that the unorthodox pagan practices and ritual offerings were threatening the country's national security. Reactions such as these, particularly coming from individuals of similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds validate Santa Muerte of corruption and criminality. Moreover, it nullifies the belief that only people who share the same cultural background and societal stratification understand the true meaning of this religion, a concern voiced by many devotees during the study of Santa Muerte.

Evil is universal and evidently affects all people regardless of ethnicity. According to T.L. Depue, evil can be defined as "a destructive, poisonous form of spirituality with outward expression that degrade, dispirit, disintegrate, dehumanize, and destroy human beings, as well as the set of ideas, dignity, freedoms, networks, property, capital, and activities engulfing the constructive social institutions that people depend on for survival."<sup>61</sup> Santa Muerte, as practiced

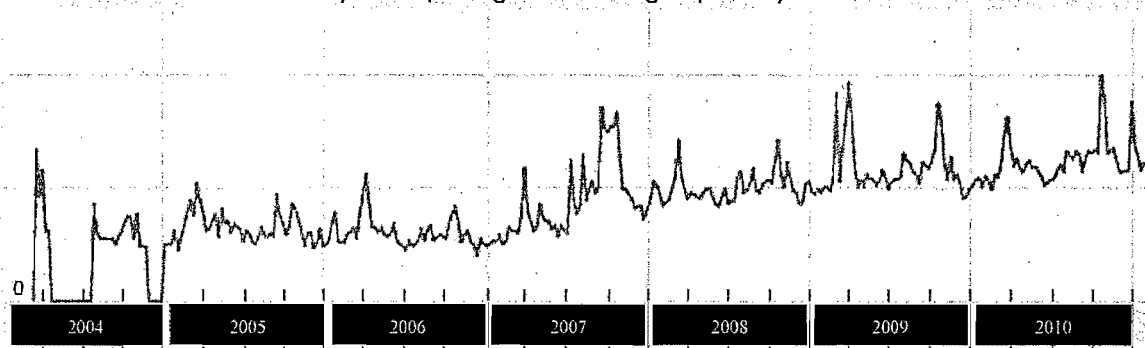
by the criminal adherents, undoubtedly encapsulates the aforementioned traits as defined by T. L. Depue and by bringing harm to humanity, impeding freewill, and opposing the rule of law it will continue to be a dilemma of significant concern for the U.S. and its local citizens affected by these transgressions.

Citizens in both the U.S. and Mexico, to include the Mexican government, agree that Santa Muerte is in and of itself a belief incompatible to good order and discipline. Its religious ideologies and esoteric practices, in its absolute essence, evidently promotes a society of lawbreakers and if that is not convincing enough, then at least consider the recent events involving David Romo, the high priest of Santa Muerte. According to police reports, Archbishop David Romo, was arrested on January 4, 2011 by Mexican police officials on suspicion of kidnapping and money laundering in support of the Gulf Cartels.<sup>62</sup> (See Figure 5, Appendix B)

The evidence shows that Santa Muerte's esoteric practice promotes violence and cultivates insurrection. The religion is real, and unquestionably one of the most significant threats permeating throughout Mexico's borderlands and several U.S. cities within the Latin communities. U.S. law officials at the state level have repeatedly warn the Federal Government about the nature of this irregular threat, a dilemma that if continually ignored, will pose a threat to the U.S. homeland security.

## Appendix A, Tables

**Table 1: 2010 Trend Analyses Depicting the Growing Popularity of Santa Muerte**



**Table 2: Santa Muerte Names**

Affectionate Names	Meaning
Sagrada Muerte	Sacred Death
Muerte Querida	Death Beloved
Poderosa Senora	Powerful Lady
La Madrina	The Godmother
La Nina Blanca	The White Girl
La Santa Nina Blanca	The Holy White Girl
La Nina	The Girl
La Bonita	The Pretty Girl
Senora de Las Sombras	Lady of the Shadows

**Table 3: Santa Muerte Traditional Offerings**

Traditional Offerings	Meaning
Money	The preferred offering, which signifies gratitude.
Flowers	Fresh flowers representing sincere gratitude. Colors representative of specific request.
Candy	This particular offering is a matter of personal preference and is normally associated with love and health offerings.
Wines and Liquor	Common offerings include tequila, rum, and dark beers served in glass bottles or cups but not plastic.
Cigars, Cigarettes, Marijuana, Incense	Cigarettes or Marijuana smoke blown over the image to purify the altar.
Fruit	Variety of fruits are used. Apples are the most common, which represents original sin. The color of the fruit corresponds to the benefit sought.
Water	Considered to be a crucial offering and should be clear and still, preferably from tap for purification.
Candles	The color of the candle corresponds to the benefit sought. Also associated with Novenas.

Appendix B, Figures

Figure 1: Santa Muerte Statues Top and Bottom Pictures



Photos Courtesy of Dan Morales (<http://www.danmoralesphotography.com/>)



Photos Courtesy of Adam Wiseman (<http://adamwiseman.photoshelter.com/>)

Appendix B, Figures

Figure 2: Santa Muerte Traditional Symbols

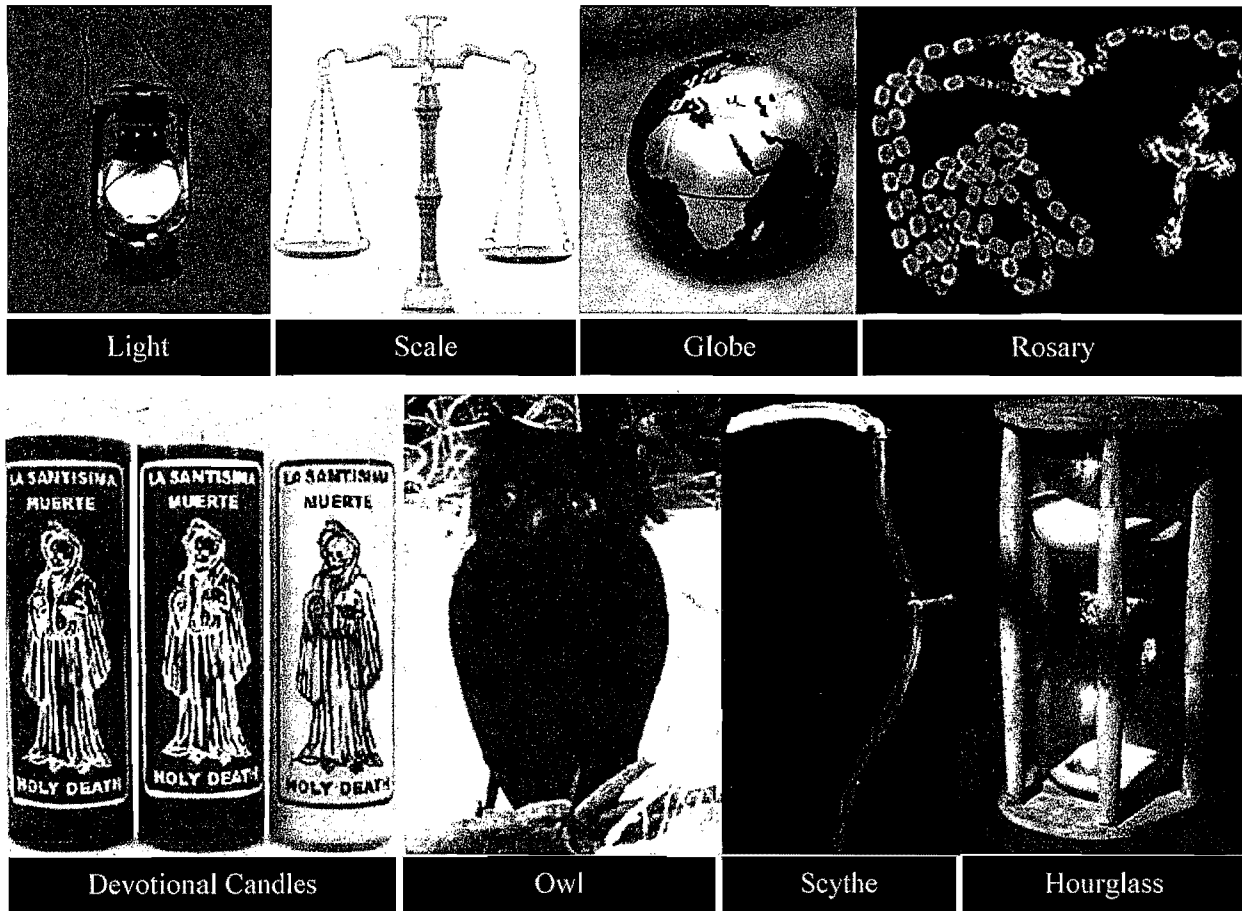


Figure 3: Adherents proudly displaying their Santa Muerte Tattoos.



Appendix B, Figures

Figure 4: Music Covers and Banners promoting Santa Muerte.

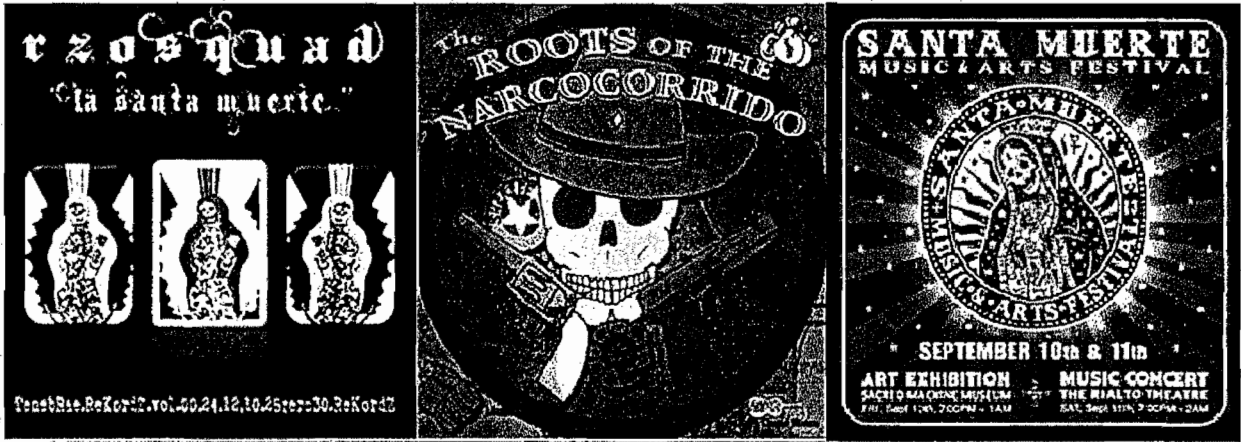
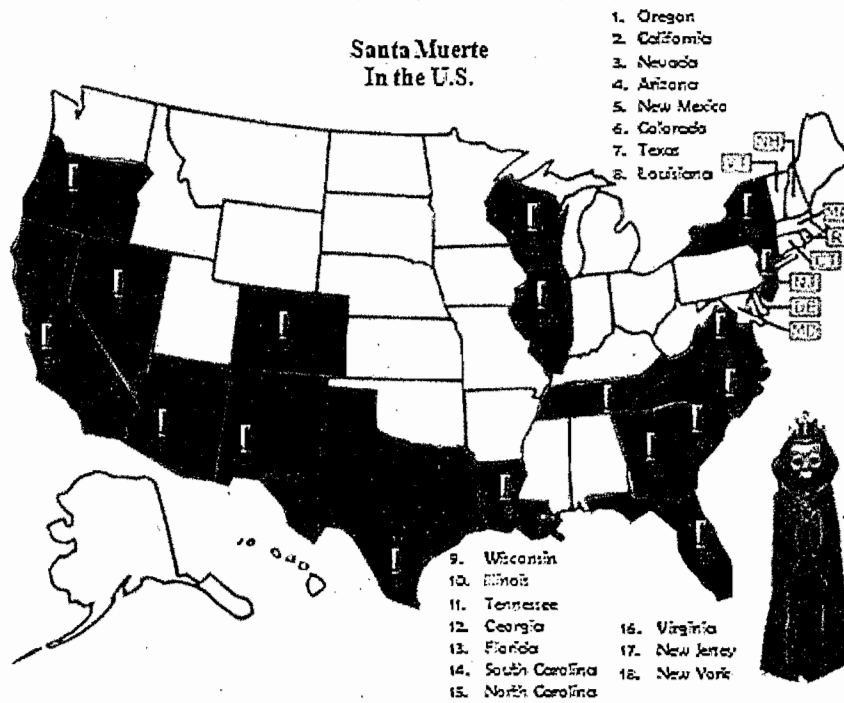


Figure 5: High Priest David Romo Guillén escorted by Mexican Police. Right Side: Romo located Top Center.



## Appendix B, Figures

Figure 6: Santa Muerte in Mexico & the U.S.



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